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THE LAST TRUMP CARD

Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths

Introduction

How to affirm the religious Other is generally experienced as one of the most immediate and difficult of modern theological questions. Advances in comparative religion, media-led forces of globalisation, and a host of political and economic pressures for human relationships to be developed on pragmatic rather than denominational grounds, have combined to raise sharp challenges to each religion's traditional assurance of its own superiority and of the radical inadequacy of unbelievers. In the Christian context, much of the response to these challenges has come from theologians such as John Hick and Paul Knitter, who in separate ways have recorded how their careers in a diverse world have led to encounters with non-Christians whose selfless lives seem to render age-old exclusivist assumptions intolerable. Hick and Knitter venture beyond the inclusivist paradigms now favoured by mainstream Catholic and Protestant thinkers, in order to chart universalist, performative soteriologies which uncouple salvation from formal doctrine and practice, in order to premise it on saintliness alone or on participation in schemes of social liberation.¹ For such 'pluralist' thinkers, timeworn assurances of religious superiority are not only dubious morally, given their past association with intolerance, but are also unverifiable, since they posit privileged access to the sacred on the grounds of purely internal and hence relative claims.

In this essay I examine, from a Muslim perspective, the coherence and value of recent attempts to reshape Islamic thinking along analogous lines. Although not as developed as its Christian equivalent, this discussion assumes a larger practical significance than it conventionally does in the modern Christian case. Proposals to rescuscitate classical Muslim provisions in the realm of minority law have provoked anxiety among non-Muslim citizens of states undergoing

¹ Most recently and cogently, Knitter 1996. The importance of his encounter with a Muslim for his rejection of Rahner's inclusivism is recorded on pp.7-8.

strategies of 'Islamisation', by no means all of whom share the apologists' confidence that the traditional arrangements "hold the promise of greater freedom than that available within the framework of the liberal state" (Legenhausen, 1997; cf. p. 148). The argument over the compatibility of such laws with the Koranic understanding of a just God must be developed elsewhere; but in these pages, I argue that Muslim supersessionist theologies may be disconnected from such purported legal entailments, and may be read in such a way as to reinforce rather than obstruct dialogue and mutual esteem. If this can be demonstrated, the moral case for the new theological 'pluralism' must lose a good deal of its force.

The Muslim soteriology which shapes this argument operates within several distinct registers of discourse. In what follows it has seemed wise to limit the discussion to the formal exoteric theology (*kalām*) of mainstream Sunnism, in its two major formulations of Ash'arism and Māturīdism. Islamic mysticism has been excluded, not because it is less normatively Islamic than the *kalām* but because of the difficulties posed by the elusive informality of much Sufi discourse, with its tropical and hyperbolic features of poetic license whose aim is typically to interpret or arouse transformative affective states rather than to chart fixed dogmatic positions.² It seems clear that *kalām*, as a systematic theology susceptible to exegesis and development on formal and immediately accessible hermeneutic principles of a scriptural and rational order, furnishes a more workable framework for the discussion of this issue than do the inspired insights of the mystics. Moreover, it is *kalām*, rather than Sufism, which interacts with the *Sharī'a*, and provides the immediate moral and theological context for its provisions in the area of the treatment of non-Muslims.

² Persianists will recognise this as one sense of the desire for *vaṣl* rather than *faṣl*, *maḥw* rather than *naḥw* or the method of *ishārat* rather than *'ibārat*. A consideration of Sufi approaches to Koranic abrogationism would focus on thinkers such as the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabī (d.1240), although the widespread readings of him as a 'pluralist' need to be tempered by a survey of his less eirenic statements. For instance, in two of his works Christians are described as *mushrikūn* (polytheists); see Ibn 'Arabī, 1324/1906, II, 284 and Ibn 'Arabi, 1978, 274. 'Pluralist' or 'universalist' opinions have also been read into the poetry of his Persian contemporary Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d.1273). For arguments against a 'pluralist' reading of these figures see Legenhausen, 1997, 134-38.

Modern Islam and Pluralism

Only a comparatively small number of twentieth-century Muslim theologians have proposed an Islamic equivalent to modern Christian pluralism. Concerned to harmonise the faith with the modern axiom of equality, these writers characteristically deploy complex hermeneutic strategies of contextualisation and deconstruction in order to unearth the seeds of a theological pluralism from the Koran's discourse. The South African thinker Farid Esack is the most recent case in point, with his revival of Rashīd Riḍā's project of redefining the Koranic concept of 'believer' (*mu'min*), generally understood by the exegetic tradition as a subset of 'Muslim', to include all believers in God.³ In similar vein, a recent article by Mahmoud Ayoub lists and criticises the modern theologians, including Shaykh al-Azhar Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭanṭawī and the popular Egyptian television preacher Muḥammad al-Sha'rāwī, who persist in the classical doctrine that earlier religions are now abrogated. The most significant dissidents he is able to muster to his cause are the very untraditional figures of the revolutionary Iranian mullah Sayyid Maḥmūd Ṭāleqānī, and the Pakistani modernist intellectual Fazlur Rahman. Both men apparently broke with the consensus of Sunnī and Shī'ī scholarship to hold that the detailed formulations of Judaism and Christianity are to be esteemed as fully adequate vehicles of salvation even after the historical advent of Islam, and Ayoub commends as a fresh and indispensable initiative their affirmation of the literal meaning of those Koranic texts that appear to support this view.⁴

No one could doubt the intelligence and generosity of the pluralist thesis advanced by thinkers such as Esack and Ayoub. It does, however, appear to answer certain initial questions at the price of raising others which may prove to be still less tractable. One of these relates to the law of noncontradiction and entails the risk of succumbing to what Gavin D'Costa has dubbed "transcen-

³ The Sunni consensus is recorded by Ghazālī, 1972, 209: "the Jews, Christians, and the followers of all the religions, whether Zoroastrians, idol-worshippers or others, are all to be considered unbelievers [*kāfir*] as is specified in the Koran and agreed upon [*ijmā*] by the Muslim community [*umma*]." Esack's proposals for a Copernican revolution in Muslim theology are set out Esack, 1997.

⁴ Most notably 2:62: "Those who have believed, and those who have been Jews, Christians and Sabaeans; whoever has believed in God and the Last Day and has done what is right; shall be rewarded by their Lord; no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve." Classical exegesis (*tafsīr*) takes this to denote members of other religions who had converted to Islam; this is challenged by Ayoub, most recently in Ayoub, 1997.

dental agnosticism” (D’Costa, 1990). This problem is already recognised by the *kalām* tradition: in the twelfth century a theologian could respond to the claim that every religion must be true by observing that this would entail the concurrent validity of the belief in the created and the pre-eternal nature of the world, the existence and the nonexistence of the Creator God, monotheism and dualism, and the reality and the non-reality of the divine predicates—“and this is impossible” (Nasafi, 1990, 22).

Since the noncontradiction argument has been the subject of detailed development in the Christian context and is equally applicable to Islamic theism, it will not be pursued further here. There are, however, further difficulties with pluralist readings of the Muslim scriptures which do call for a tradition-specific analysis. One of these concerns the self-understanding of the primordial Muslim community with which the scripture immediately discoursed. Are we to believe that the Companions of the Prophet were ‘pluralists’ (a view which is unverified and historically unlikely); or were they simply wrong (which is theologically difficult)? The third possibility, that their views were religiously proper only within their context, has the no less radical consequence of inexorably demanding a repudiation or at least a radical diminution of the assurance of the ‘repleteness’ of the texts in favour of assumptions of inherent indeterminacy and contextual relativity, an effectively postmodern move which amounts to the extension of Ash’arite subjectivism to the revelation itself. At the very least, to secure their case the pluralists must relinquish fundamental methodological principles which for centuries have overlaid the texts with a unifying exegetic template, including such features as the belief in the abrogation of certain Koranic passages, the centrality of the canonical hadith discourse and the theory of scholarly consensus (*ijmā’*) as a transhistorical expression of God’s will. In place of these, Esack and others propose a new exegetic turn which occludes some texts by means of others on grounds not of chronology but of fidelity to consciences shaped by a late twentieth-century egalitarian and ‘liberative’ ethos.

Given that Islam has no system of magisterial control of exegesis, the implications of this reworking of the method by which the religion is ‘found’ are clearly far-reaching. To interrogate the *ijmā’*, to bypass the hadith, and to loosen the canons of Koranic hermeneutics to secure a more courteous estimation of the Other, as Esack and Ayoub have done, is implicitly to query the exegetic reason for every other aspect of the faith, raising the possibility of unravelment into postmodern relativity and sectarian collapse, the fate described by Graham Leonard, a critic of comparable moves in Christianity, as ‘the tyranny of subjectivism’. Reflecting the current weakness of Islamic lib-

eralism generally, the number of Muslim thinkers who find that option promising, or 'liberative', remains very small.⁵

An honest assessment of the Muslim body of scripture which collocates all the relevant passages and accepts the religiously necessary assurance that their reception by the tradition was not thoroughly misguided, appears to confirm the classical Sunnī reading of the revelation as a frankly supersessionist event, proclaiming the abrogation (*naskh*) of prior religion by Islam. Rooted in an original context of polemic against entrenched Arab idolatry, and later, following the exodus to Medina, against local representatives of Judaism and Christianity, the Koran and hadith deploy arguments against all of these faiths. We turn now to a brief account of the style and temper of these arguments, which supply the foundations and many of the parameters of Islamic supersessory discourse.

Arguments Against Other Religions

The Koranic denunciation of Arab paganism is particularly unambiguous. This ancestral religion is portrayed as a fearsome, occult idolatry which oppressed the poor, denied the survival of the individual soul, and relegated *Allāh* to the status of a sky-god whose duties involved no more than the vague supervision of the peninsula's tribal deities. The Koran insists that this is *shirk*, 'empartnering' others to God by ascribing real power and will to them, an error which can lead only to an eternal hellfire "whose fuel is men and stones." It is clear that not even the most committed Hickean exegete could describe a religion portrayed in such unremittingly negative terms as a "liberative openness to the Real"; to use Hick's Kantian terminology, the Koran makes it clear that phenomenal representations of the noumenal are very far from being equivalently valid.

The cases of Judaism and Christianity are, of course, a good deal less straightforward. The Koran throughout (e.g. 2:136) adopts the view that both were founded by authentic spokesmen of God and were hence at their points of origin perfect vehicles of grace and salvation. It also repeatedly implies that God's guidance to humanity was not exhausted by the biblical line of proph-

⁵ We might add to the list the best-known Muslim postmodern theologian, the Algerian thinker Muhammad Arkoun, who uses Derrida to unpick traditional 'transhistorical' views of revelation and canonicity; cf. Lee, 1997, 143-74.

ecy, by recalling the exemplary lives of non-Hebraic messengers.⁶ It announces that “for every people there has been a guide” (13:7), that “there has never been a nation among whom a warner has not passed” (35:24) and likewise: “Verily We have raised in every nation a messenger proclaiming, Serve God, and shun false gods” (16:36). A hadith even specifies the number of God’s prophets, who have numbered no fewer than a hundred and twenty-four thousand, from Adam down to and including Muḥammad (Haythamī, 1352AH, 1, 159; 3, 115).⁷

This understanding of an expansive divine strategy for human ‘salvation’, or, more precisely, what the less dramatic Koranic soteriology, which lacks a doctrine of original sin, understands as ‘harvesting’ or ‘success’ (*ḡalāḥ*), has obvious and vital implications. The Koranic perspective, affirmed and elaborated in classical exegesis, appears to be that there is no scandal either of particularity or of multiple religions; there is, in reality, a single religion (*al-dīn*), of which the various present-day faiths are the remnants and offshoots. And because the grace mediated by the word made Book operates non-redemptively, and because scriptures have been ‘sent down’ before, the new divine initiative is not construed as absolute or categoric in its displacement of what preceded, given that no new type of relationship between humanity and God is proposed. For Islam, then, pre-Koranic history is not mere pre-history. Humanity did not have to wait for Muḥammad in order to gain the opportunity of complete ‘success’.

It is this conviction of God’s generous filling of history and of the map of the world with equally reliable signs pointing back to Him that permits the Koran’s frequently-noted advocacy of mutual esteem, which requires Muslims to tell the People of the Book that “we believe in that which was revealed unto us and was revealed unto you; our God and your God is One” (29:46). As Esack and others correctly point out, there are Koranic passages in this vein which seem to verge on an out-and-out pluralism. Sūra 5:44-48, in particular, which has become something of a cliché whenever Muslims appear at inter-faith encounters, is certainly quite remarkable for a pre-modern religious document, praising the scriptures given to the Jewish prophets and Jesus as “full of guidance and light”, and enjoining the Prophet Muḥammad to act as arbiter

⁶ Such as Hūd and Šālīḥ; see 7:65-79.

⁷ This figure was accepted by the normative *kalām* tradition; see Bhaghdādī, 1928, 157.

among their followers on the basis of God's revelation, until the Judgement brings a definitive unveiling and explanation of all religious differences.

Realistically interpreted, this passage has two obvious objectives: firstly, to affirm the Judeo-Christian line of prophecy in order to proclaim Muḥammad's triumphant succession to it, and secondly, to make of his religion a 'guardian' (*muḥaymin*) over the surviving advocates of the earlier versions of faith. This commandment drives Islam's historical self-understanding as a protector of Jews and Christians who are *ahl al-dhimma*, communities accorded a covenant of religious inviolability by the custodians of the later and universal revelation. It is well-known that the majority of historical Muslim communities have tolerated their monotheistic minorities, following the Prophet's warning that "whoever harms a member of a *dhimma* community shall have me as his adversary on the Day of Judgement" (Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, cited in 'Asqalānī, 1414/1993, no. 12440). This attitude stems from the Koranic advocacy of a paternalistic supervisory duty, relics of which survived even into the twentieth century. Not unrepresentative are the remarks of the last Turkish governor of Mount Athos in 1912, conversing with a French journalist as he awaited arrest by the conquering Greek armies:

Look around you. Look at these thousands of monks; visit their monasteries, question them yourself. Of what, in reality, can they complain? Have we touched their rules? Have we violated their property? Have we forbidden their pilgrimages? Have we altered even a tittle of their secular constitution? ... What race, I ask you, what conqueror could have treated these people with greater humanity, greater moderation, greater religious tolerance? Under our law they have remained no less free, indeed freer, than under the Byzantine Emperors. ... And they have not had to endure under our domination a hundredth part of the vexations that you have imposed on your monks in France. ... *Allez, Monsieur!* They will regret us. Greeks, Russians, Serbs, Rumanians, Bulgars, all those monks hate each other like poison. They are bound together only by their common loathing of Islam. When we are no longer there, they will tear each other to pieces. (Norwich *et al.*, 1966, 84)

More recent still is the image of the somnolent Jordanian constable, smoking a hookah on his bench outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, ready to telephone for assistance should disputes break out between rival groups of pilgrims. To this day, the key to that church is held, by common agreement, by a Muslim; a fact which symbolises the confident, not to say condescending, traditional Islamic self-conception very accurately.

The recurrently demonstrated capacity of Islamic society for this kind of indulgent presiding over non-Muslim communities can be taken as empirical proof, disclosed in the difficult laboratory of history, of the sincerity of the Muslim belief that earlier dispensations have been superseded far less radically

by Islam than, for instance, Judaism was superseded by Christianity, on the classical Christian view. But the accommodation of Jews and Christians in medieval Muslim cities cannot safely be read as a sign that the tradition expects similar arrangements to prevail in Paradise. The logic of the *dhimma* rules was neither that of a pluralist soteriology nor of a modern secular impartiality based in universal concepts of human rights and a thoroughgoing religious indifferentism. Sumptuary and other laws, mostly dating from the time of the early caliphs, did impose certain disabilities on Christians and Jews, and there is a range of other evidence to confirm that the historical legal practice of Islam cannot honestly be construed as an approbation, but as a confirmation of the theological verdict that Christian and Jewish versions of faith are no longer complete, although they are rooted ultimately in revelation and hence merit some form of accommodation.

This evidence is supplied by a number of scriptural passages which moderate and recontextualise the eirenic proof-texts cited by the pluralists, developing a critique of Judaism and Christianity formulated against the backdrop of the Koran's vindications of the prophethood of Muḥammad. These verses have been dated to the later stages of the Prophet's ministry in Medina, and are therefore and quite intelligibly taken by the tradition as an elucidation of what was left unsaid in the earlier passages (Peters, 1997).⁸ Let me deal firstly with those concerning Judaism.

Rabbinic Judaism of the type practised by the Jews of the Prophet's city of Medina is censured for attaching halakhic complications to the religion of the Prophets. Sometimes this is coupled to jeremiads against the 'stiff-necked' chosen people; so that elements of the Law are read as divine punishment for Israel's disobedience (4:160). The most drastic censure comes in a famously obscure passage (9:30) where 'the Jews' are reproached for believing that one 'Uzayr is "the son of God", which would thereby render their error equivalent to that of the Christians. The identification of 'Uzayr was, however, deeply problematic for the tradition. Some identified him with Ezra, condemned by some exegetes for 'falsifying' the Torah (Lazarus-Yafeh, 1992, 50-74),⁹ but Gordon Newby has recently suggested that the reference may be to the prophet Enoch, who in some Near Eastern Jewish traditions had been identified with Metatron, in which case the Koranic critique here parallels that of Karaite and

⁸ Peters documents how "the Qur'ān began to turn from a meditation upon Christianity to an argument with Christianity" (165).

⁹ As Lazarus-Yafeh shows, many Muslims did not accept this identification.

some rabbinical polemic against the apparent compromise of strict monotheism entailed by the veneration or worship of this creator-angel (Newby, 1988, 60-61).¹⁰ If this identification is correct, the inference is that the Koran is here to be read as taking one Jewish side against another, thereby denouncing a local aberration rather than indicting the religion as a whole. There are other passages which may convincingly be interpreted in the same light.

Overall therefore, despite the existence of a clear Koranic reproach to some Jews, the Koran does not appear to offer a categorical denunciation of Judaism, but only points out a number of errors in its later evolution which justify its supersession by Islam. The Koran's explicit denial of Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ, and indeed of the crucifixion itself,¹¹ ensured that antisemitism after the European fashion never took firm root in Islamic soil. Indeed, the medieval Mediterranean world could witness what Samuel Goitein famously described as a "creative symbiosis" between Judaism and Islam.¹² The worlds of the Gaonim, of Maimonides, of the Istanbul rabbis and the rich Sephardic experience, were made possible, in the last analysis, by the absence of a Koranic antisemitism.

Traditional Islam's claim to supercede Christianity is of greater complexity. Again it becomes necessary to distinguish between a local and a general polemic, recognising (against much Muslim reflection) the purely ephemeral character of some Islamic scriptural criticisms of regional sectaries and the abiding import of passages which relate to doctrines held by the mainstream Chalcedonian churches. In the latter category we find, most irreducibly, an argument against the attribution of divine status to Jesus, as in the following passages from the Koran and the hadith:

O people of the Book, do not commit an excess in your religion, and do not say anything but the truth in respect of God. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only

¹⁰ The connection is the Merkava texts apparently known to seventh-century Arabian Jewry.

¹¹ Koran 4:157: "They did not kill him, and they did not crucify him; but something was made to appear to them" (*shubbiha lahum*—this phrase has been variously understood and translated; but the exoneration is clear).

¹² Goitein, 1955, 130: "Never has Judaism encountered such a close and fruitful symbiosis as that with the medieval civilization of Arab Islam." This view and the manner of its expression have provoked a controversy, for which see Wasserstrom, 1991, 43-47.

a messenger of God and His word, which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and [all] His messengers, and say not: 'Three!' [...] (4:171)

[Jesus had declared:] 'Assuredly God is my Lord and your Lord; therefore worship Him. That is the straight path.' Yet the sects differed among themselves [in christological controversies].¹³ (19:36-7)

On Judgement Day, God shall ask the Christians what they worshipped, and when they say 'Christ, the son of God', they shall be driven to hell like a quarrelsome herd, butting each other, tumbling one after the other into the fire. (Muslim, *Īmān*, 81)¹⁴

Do not extol me excessively as the Christians extolled Jesus the son of Mary; for I am but God's slave; so say: 'God's slave and His messenger'. (Bukhārī, *Aḥādīth al-anbiyā'*, 48)

As in its treatment of Judaism, but more sharply, the Muslim revelation deploys arguments against a historically-evolved Christianity in order to justify the latest divine intervention. Given that Islam explicitly disclaims categoric novelty, its very legitimacy would be questioned were it not to point out deteriorations in its precursors. Hence, for instance, the frequent insistence that original revelations have not been reliably conserved in the biblical text.¹⁵ Hence also, and most strikingly, the Koranic rejection of the Crucifixion with a denial whose intention is apparently more rhetorical than historiographic. In the Muslim exegesis, Christianity erroneously asserted both uniqueness and divinity for its prophet,¹⁶ and adopted the Cross as the sign for this. The Cross

¹³ Hence, typically, the commentary of Baydāwī (1329AH, 406) on this verse, listing the christological points at issue between the Nestorians, Jacobites, and Melkites, contrasted with the "monotheists" (*muwahḥidūn*), "who hold simply that he was God's slave and prophet."

¹⁴ The disparagement of a Christendom divided by christological polemic is familiar in the tradition, but is moderated by the hadith in which the Prophet forecasts and censures Muslim dissension: "The Jews became divided into 71 or 72 sects, and so also did the Christians. My own nation shall divide into 73 sects." (Tirmidhī, *Īmān*, 18.)

¹⁵ For instance, Bukhārī, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, 3, where Ḥudhayfa urges the caliph 'Uthmān to preserve the integrity of the Koranic text lest it suffer the fate which befell the scriptures of the Jews and the Christians.

¹⁶ Islam has an Ebionite reading of the life and message of Christ, and some have even posited a historical link: "There is no doubt about the indirect dependence of Muhammad on Jewish Christianity. The result of this is a paradox with a truly world-historical dimension; while Jewish Christianity disappeared in the Christian church, by contrast it was preserved in Islam, where it has found a place to our day in some of its directing impulses" (Hans-Joachim Schoeps, cited in Bernheim, 1997, 269). Bernheim's

is the sign of a *sui generis* intersection of heaven and earth, and hence contests the Koran's insistence that an infinitely generous Lord must have actualised multiple perfect interventions. To negate the doctrine, the symbol itself has been erased.

Islam thus ontologically demotes Jesus to the rank and file of prophets,¹⁷ but it does not negate his messiahhood, and this may at first sight seem paradoxical. The question arises as to why the Koran and its bearer, who announced finality and an eschatological role for his own work, should have allowed messianic status, with all its culminating implications, to Jesus.

The tradition clearly seeks to resolve this paradox in terms of the 'sealing' of prophetic cycles. Jesus was Messiah because he closed the Jewish story. But Muḥammad is the eschatological prophet (*al-ʿAqib*) and the Seal of the Messengers (*Khātam al-mursalīn*) because he closes a still more glorious and far wider story. Jesus is the counterpoint to Moses, while Muḥammad becomes the culmination of the larger tradition of which Abraham is the pioneer and archetype. Hence Islam's central rites often combine Abrahamic and eschatological significance. The five-times-daily Muslim prayers close with the *tashahhud* invocation which links Muḥammad to Abraham. The pilgrimage to Mecca is a commemoration of key Abrahamic events: the well from which the pilgrims drink is said to have been dug by Ishmael; the rite of procession between two hills recalls Hagar's quest for water and simultaneously anticipates the thirst suffered at the Resurrection; the pilgrims visit the site where, in Muslim memory, Abraham was called upon to sacrifice his son, and where, during the nearby rite of 'Arafāt, the standing of the 'shrouded' pilgrims explicitly

thesis that the apostolic church was led by James in Jerusalem and continued to practice a form of the *halakha*, rejecting Paul's incarnationism, may well suggest the possibility of a linear influence on Islam to the secular historian (although the proof is entirely lacking), but to the Muslim theologian it supplies confirmation of Koranic christology.

¹⁷ The Koran describes Jesus as God's "word" (*kalima*) (4:171)—not as uncreated logos but as the divine utterance "Be! and it is" (3:59). All contingent phenomena are hence 'words' which reveal the divine immanence: "Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (2:110), for He is "closer to man than his jugular vein" (50:16). Because of the divine nearness to the creation, expressed in the Koran's frequent invocation of the Divine 'signs' in nature and in its muted Fall narrative, an 'incarnation' is not necessary, and would indeed imply that there had been a hopeless estrangement of humankind from an utterly transcendent God, a concept whose foreignness to Islam will be revealed by any survey of its devotional poetry.

connotes the Resurrection.¹⁸ Abraham, as the Koran puts it, was “neither Jew nor Christian”; he was a *muslim*, in the sense of submitting to God in a primordial mode (3:67); and the retrieval of primordiality, which forms the coda to imminently-ending religious history, appears as the express purpose and temper of the Prophet’s life.

The Abrahamic archetype also underpins Islam’s understanding of its universality, a further aspect of its abrogationist theology. Isaac was pure Hebrew, as was his descendent Jesus of Nazareth. Ishmael, patriarch of the Arabs, was half-Egyptian. Genesis attributes to God the promise that “I will make of him a great nation” (17:20) and then leaves his story in silence in order to recount the unfolding of the covenant through Isaac. By linking the Semitic patrimony to that of Egypt, Islam proclaims the validity of its extension and belongingness to the core of the Gentile world.

As the Ishmaelite aspect of Semitic revelation, Islam is thus explicitly universal in its ambitions. A hadith records that “while earlier prophets were sent only to their own nations, I am sent to all mankind” (Bukhārī, *Tayammum*, 1). Muslims thus become the eschatological community, the last who shall be first. Strategically appropriating Matthew’s Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), a hadith makes the claim that

the likeness of the Muslims to the Jews and Christians is that of a man who hired a company of men to work until nightfall. But they worked only until the middle of the day, saying: ‘We have no need of your wage.’ So he hired others, saying, ‘Complete the remainder of this day, and you shall receive the [full] sum which I set forth.’ And they worked until, when it was the time of the afternoon prayer, they said, ‘[Only] that which we have worked shall be yours.’ So he hired a further group, who laboured until the day was done and the sun set, and they received the full wage of the other two groups. (Bukhārī, *Mawāqit al-ṣalāt*, 17)

Another supersessionist New Testament image, that of the *angularis fundamentum*,¹⁹ is no less deliberately appropriated:

In regard to the prophets who came before me, my likeness is that of a man who built a house, making it most fine and comely, save only for the place of one brick in the corner. The people took to walking around the house and wondering at it, saying,

¹⁸ A profound exploration of the Abrahamic resonances of Muslim eschatology is offered in Gilis, 1982.

¹⁹ Mark 12:10: “Have you not read this scripture: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.’” This closes the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen.

‘Would only that that brick were laid in place!’ I am that brick; and I am the Seal of the Prophets. (Bukhārī, *Manāqib*, 18.)

In a third hadith text, the Prophet discloses that Friday is chosen as the Muslim day of prayer as a sign that while the Muslims come last in history, they shall be first at the Judgement, and the symbol of this is Friday, which precedes Saturday and Sunday (Bukhārī, *Jumu’a*, 1).

The conclusion must hence be drawn that the founding documents of Islam intend an abrogationist salvation history; as Jane McAuliffe (1991, 290) concludes from her own, far more exhaustive survey of the Koranic data: “In no way, then, does biblical Christianity remain a fully valid ‘way of salvation’ after the advent of Muḥammad.” Honestly interpreted, the texts assume that while other communities are to be tolerated, God’s new covenant is emphatically with the people of Islam, as upholders of the final Abrahamic restoration.

This perception is implicit in the Muslim concept of covenant. The Koran, as a recent study observes, is less explicitly covenantal than is the Bible, probably because the Muslim scripture is “neither directed to nor preoccupied with a single people, but to human beings as such, so a historical covenant could not figure in its outworking” (Burrell and Malits, 1997, 9). Nonetheless a Koranic passage (7:172) does speak of a primordial covenant between God and every human soul, sealed before the creation of the world. In Muslim reflection, Islam is not a compact with a particular section of humanity, but is the eschatological restoration of this primordial pledge, one of whose ‘signs’ is the Hajj to the House which is “for all mankind” (2:125):

When God took the Covenant, He recorded it in writing and fed it to the Black Stone, and this is the meaning of the saying of those who touch the Stone during the rounds of the Ancient House: ‘O God! This is believing in You, fulfilling our pledge to You, and declaring the truth of Your record.’ (Ḥaddād, 1411/1991, 7)

By affirming the Prophet’s eschatological retrieval of this first covenantal relationship, the theologians discount the continuing validity of later compacts between God and individual branches of the Adamic family.

The Muslim conscience, initially nurtured on this scriptural vision of Islam’s place in universal history, was in the generations after the Prophet’s death shaped also by the spectacle of the religion’s success. Islam could claim to have outmoded Judaism by the sheer fact of its triumph: as Freud cynically put it, “Allah showed himself far more grateful to his chosen people than Yahweh did to his” (Freud, 1974, 92). And in respect of Christianity, it was assumed that the absorption of the great patriarchal cities of Antioch, Alexandria and others into the Muslim world could never have been allowed by a God who did

not regard Christianity as obsolete and the fact of Muslim ascendancy was often cited by those who argued against what was taken to be a remnant Christianity.²⁰ Most impressively of all, Islam now presided over Jerusalem itself, a hegemony contested by the Crusaders, and today by Zionism, but nonetheless, for the great bulk of Muslim history, a tangible and almost sacramental argument for supersession. Muslims could claim the Dome of the Rock, built on the site of Solomon's monumental sanctuary, as the Third Temple, the "house of prayer for all nations" prophesied by Mark. Whereas Mecca demonstrates Islam's restoration of the Abrahamic narrative, Jerusalem appears as the sign of Islam's affirmation of the Mosaic subplot within it and its incorporation within its ambitious claim to embrace the entire world.²¹ These claims are exquisitely symbolised by the Dome's universal architectural character, which links, as does the realm of Islam, East and West:

The Dome of the Rock is, in fact, the *Sposalizio* or *Nuptials* of the East and West; and nowhere else in the world, not even in St Mark's in Venice, are Orient and Occident indissoluble and one. It is the most sacred and holy building I have ever seen. (Sitwell, 1957, 134)

Jerusalem's Islamic monuments yield an allegory of supersession which is no less deliberate than that of St. Peter's Basilica and the other signs of Christian mastery of the once-pagan capital of Rome.

Working with the scriptures, and informed by this triumphalist reading of history, the jurists and *kalām* theologians of medieval Islam maintained a consensus that the earlier versions of faith have now been rendered invalid (*bā'il*). Shahrastānī (d.1153), for instance, one of the giants of Ash'arite theology, uncomplicatedly affirmed that "this Law [of Islam] abrogates all other laws" (Shahrastānī, 1934, 446). Even today, students at al-Azhar University in Cairo, the bastion of classical Sunnite orthodoxy, are required to memorise the rhyming creed of Ibrāhām al-Laqqānī (d.1631) which includes the words: "Islam's supersession [*naskh*] of other faiths has taken place inescapably; may God abase those who deny this (Laqqānī, 1403/1983, 137).

His commentator Bayjūrī (Laqqānī, 1403/1983, 137) adds the scarcely needful words:

²⁰ For example, the puzzle of Muslim triumph greatly occupied St. Gregory Palamas. See Vryonis, 1971, 426-27.

²¹ There is copious literature here. For some characteristic Muslim reflections see, for instance, Pallavicini, 1996 and Schleifer, 1998.

the hadiths in this regard are very numerous, and reach the degree of *tawātur* [multiple simultaneous chains of transmission by sound narrators], to the effect that the supersession by the Prophet's religion (may God bless him and grant him peace) of other religions has taken place, and is established in revelation by the consensus [*ijmā'*] of the Muslims.

Another representative figure, the thirteenth-century Syrian jurist Nawawī, even insisted that

Someone who does not believe that whoever follows another religion besides Islam is an unbeliever, or doubts that such a person is an unbeliever, or considers their sect to be valid, is himself an unbeliever, even if he manifests Islam and believes in it. (Nawawī, 1412/1991, X, 70, cited in Keller, 1996, 25)

Citing this verdict, the modern theologian Nuh Keller (1996, 25) adds:

This is not only the position of the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence represented by Nawawī, but is also the recorded position of all three other Sunnī schools: Hanafī (Ibn Abidin, *Radd al-muhtar*, 3.287), Maliki (Dardir, *al-Sharh al-saghir*, 4.435), and Hanbali (Bahuti, *Kashshaf al-qina'*, 6.170). ... The scholars of Sacred Law are unanimous about the abrogation of all other religions by Islam because it is the position of Islam itself.

This straightforward image of the trumping of earlier religions by Islam does not, however, logically require the eternal damnation of all who adhere to them. Keller cites the hadith which holds that "any Jew or any Christian who hears of me and dies without believing in that with which I am sent, will be among the dwellers in hellfire" (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, cited in Keller, 1996, 24).

This report points to the crux of traditional *kalām* teaching on the fate of non-Muslims. The theodicy of particularism is resolved by the view that damnation is entailed by wilful rejection, not by ignorance. Given its lack of a doctrine of original sin (in the sense of an inherited defect of sanctifying grace), and its consequent assurance that, in the words of a hadith, "every child is born according to the primordial human disposition [*fiṭra*]" (Muslim, Qadar, 25), a disposition which when maintained is enough to bring success (Bukhārī, Wuḍū, 75), Islam assumes that all human beings are innocent until proven otherwise, that sanctity is our natural condition even after the Fall, and that heaven is hence the destination that is normative to post-Adamic humanity.²² Guided by

²² Since Adam's penitent 'turning' was accepted (Koran 2:37). The Augustinian 'peccatist' view does not, of course, exhaust the possibilities of Christian thinking even in the West, as has been shown by, *inter alia*, Pagels, 1988. Justifying the new initiative towards non-Christian religions launched by Vatican II, Catholic thinkers, following Rahner in particular, urged a rediscovery of the greater openness of some patristic

this anthropology, most early *kalām* scholars regarded the intellect as an autonomous source of moral knowledge, and affirmed the capacity of human minds to reflect upon the general revelation in nature so as to know God and the universals of moral law even in the absence of a specific revelation. Just as intuition, cautious experimentation and observation allow us to differentiate between nourishing and poisonous foods even without consulting an expert, so too human beings may know virtue from vice without the help of specific revelation (Nasafi, 1990, 473). Indeed, the Māturīdīs held that the unreached are obligated (*mukallaf*) in this respect and that God will judge them for their response to Him even though He has not willed that they should have a detailed revealed law.²³ Because they are “in the same category as the Muslims, but are excused their ignorance of [Islamic] prophecy and the rulings of the *Sharī‘a*” (Baghdādī, 1928, 262), they may be classed as a functional religious community, for whom heaven or hell are meaningful futures.

The late Ash‘arite commitment to a ‘high’ view of revelation excluded the view that the unreached might be under an obligation to know God and the moral law. Nonetheless, most Ash‘arites held that they were still able to do so. Individuals who infer the unity and justice of God but are ignorant of revealed law “have the status of Muslims” and can achieve success in the next world. Those who die in a condition of unbelief (*kufṛ*) because of a failure to make this deduction may expect neither reward nor punishment, although God may admit them to Paradise “through His sheer grace, not as a reward,” just as he does for children who die before maturity (Baghdādī, 1928, 263).

thinkers (Origen, Clement of Alexandria), with their notion of a *logos spermatikos* outside the visible Church, and the closure of the exclusivist ‘parenthesis’, by which Augustine is presumably implied. Cf. Masson’s interpretation of *Nostra Aetate* in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 87 (1965), 1067. In Protestantism, John Wesley’s quietly Pelagian moderation of the Augustinian stance allowed him to refuse to “conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation.” (Cited in Sanders, 1994, 249.) Such voices show that there can be greater convergence between Western Christian and Islamic soteriologies than is often believed, particularly by such polemicists as the late Ismail Faruqi; cf. his anti-Augustinian *Christian Ethics* (1967).

²³ Reinhart, 1995, 45, 48, 59. The later Ash‘arī position was more pessimistic. Ghazālī, for instance, will not allow so weighty a duty to depend on the inherently unreliable and passional human mind (p.74). The Māturīdīs maintain the earlier and apparently more Koranic faith in the indicativeness of the world.

Although the *kalām* thus holds that in the absence of revelation theology is feasible (Ash'arism) or even required (Māturīdism), God's servants are not thereby excused the duty of recognising the prophet of their time. His form of religion has been divinely tailored to their needs and he has been gifted with miracles commanding its acceptance; hence the evidentiary signs of Muḥammad's prophecy, including the pebbles which sang God's praises in his hand, the splitting of the moon, and the water which gushed from between his fingers (Baghdādī, 1928, 161). "[A]nd whoever claims that he used magic or trickery in producing miracles is no better than he who brings the same charge against Moses" (Baghdādī, 1928, 162). However, the prophet of the time need only be obeyed in the case of sound conveyance, as the hadith cited earlier and the *kalām* consensus insist. The Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs make it clear that those who do not know, through no fault of their own, are also candidates for *falāḥ*.

For Sunnī theologians of either persuasion the problem nonetheless persists of how to define the point at which a new revealed religion can be said to have been communicated. Were Byzantine theologians guilty of a sinful rejection of God because they sincerely believed that Muslims worshipped a hollow copper sphere (Sahas, 1995)²⁴ or could the Latin crusading élite be taken to task for refusing a religion that their *Chansons de Geste* told them was a crude polytheism (Daniels, n.d.)? Islamic theology never supplied a clear criterion, although a range of opinions was ventured. One influential view was that of Ghazālī, who despite his Ash'arite pessimism on natural knowledge made clear his belief that pre-Koranic communities could still experience *falāḥ*, even if they choose to reject Islam, when the new revelation has been inadequately conveyed to them. Ghazālī's importance justifies an extended quotation:

God's grace [*rahma*] encompasses many of the earlier communities, even though most shall be exposed to Hellfire, either lightly—even for a moment, or a while [*sā'a*]²⁵—or for an extended period, so that the term 'cohort of the Fire' may be applied to them.²⁵ More than this, I hold that most of the Christians of Byzantium [Rūm] and the Turks of this day are, God willing, included in grace. By these I mean the inhabitants of the

²⁴ Despite the proximity of the Islamic lands and the presence of Muslim travellers and merchants, as late as the twelfth century Muslim catechumens in the Great Church had to pronounce a formula of renunciation of the 'hollow sphere' worshipped by Muḥammad.

²⁵ Ghazālī is alluding to a well-known hadith which describes how God commands Adam to bring out the 'cohort of the Fire' (*ba'th al-nār*), who include nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand souls (Bukhārī, Riqāq, 46; see 'Asqalānī, 1959, VII, 196).

remoter places of the Byzantine and the Turkish lands, whom the call [to Islam] has not reached. These people are in three categories:

[The first] category are those who never once heard the name of Muḥammad (may God bless him and grant him peace), and who are therefore excused.

[The second] category are those who heard his name and knew his attributes, and the miracles that appeared through him. These are people who live adjacent to the lands of Islam, and who associate with the Muslims. It is they who are the unbelievers [*kuf-fār*], the deniers [*mulḥidūn*].

There exists a third category between these two degrees. These are people who have been reached by the name of Muḥammad (may God bless him and grant him peace), but who have not heard of his attributes and his nature. Instead, they had heard since childhood that a deceiving liar by the name of Muḥammad claimed prophecy, rather as our own children hear that a liar called al-Muqanna'²⁶ claimed that God had sent him, and deceitfully claimed prophecy. In my view, these [of the third category] are included in the first. For although they had heard his name, they heard of attributes which were the opposite of those he in reality possessed. And this would not arouse any motivation to search. (Ghazālī, 1381/1961, 206)

The most prominent Muslim theologian of eighteenth-century India, Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dahlawī, also taught that the inadequately reached may attain success. In the course of his treatment of the Koranic eschatological feature known as al-A'rāf (the so-called 'Heights', which are often seen as a limbo from which souls will eventually pass into heavenly bliss)²⁷ he writes, in the paraphrase of his biographer:

Among the inmates of A'rāf will be people who did not receive the message of God, and also those living on the mountaintops who neither believed in Him nor associated anything with Him, and were just like animals who care only for the satisfaction of their natural requirements. And if at all they received the message of Islam they did not derive any benefit from it, due to their ignorance. They had been bred and brought up under circumstances which prevented them from paying any attention to deep thinking.

²⁶ This reading seems preferable to the "al-Muqaffa'" of Dunyā's edition. The historical al-Muqanna' (d.783CE) claimed to be an incarnation of God, and raised a bloody revolt in Central Asia; a regional folk memory of his foul deeds might well have persisted until Ghazālī's time. See Baghdādī, 1328/1910, 257-58.

²⁷ The tradition reached no consensus on the scriptural passage pertaining to the A'rāf (7:46-7). But the limbo idea was accepted as a legitimate interpretation and was ascribed to the leading Companion Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān. See, for instance, Ṭabarī, 1957, vol. XII, 452: "Some say they are a group of Adam's descendents whose good and evil actions are equivalent, so that they are set in that place until God decides their fate as He will, and then brings them into Paradise by His goodness and grace." This view was accepted into most of the later exegetic tradition, although it was never considered definitive.

They were capable only of this much knowledge: that Muslims are a people who eat such-and-such things and consider such-and-such things to be forbidden As these people were like quadrupeds and had not associated anything with God, they would not be blamed or taken to task [for rejecting Islam]. (Jalbani, 1967, 158).

The teaching of Ghazālī and Dahlawī, which is here clearly within the *kalām* tradition developed by Baghdādī and others in response to the Koranic revelation, unambiguously holds out the prospect of a 'wider hope'. While the blessing of membership of the community of Muḥammad confers maximal opportunities for sound belief and holiness of life, theologians may readily accept that God's grace extends beyond the frontiers of Islam insofar as present-day forms of pre-Muslim belief adhered to by communities unaware of the teachings of Islam authentically conserve monotheistic ideas and the principle of the divine justice. In the case of such communities, the concept of supersession appears to be little more than theoretical. While theologians should study such religious forms in an attempt to identify genuine survivals of their founders' teachings, and may well conclude that some have survived more authentically than others, they are not in a position to assume that the existence of Islam permits large judgements as to the ultimate fate of their individual adherents. A prudent agnosticism will here seem indispensable to those who hold that only God knows the criterion for assessing the quality of a person's response to the religious options available in his or her cultural setting.

As we have seen, the Koran places the final verdict in the hands of God, who is expected to shed light on interreligious disputes at the eschaton (5:48). The hadith material understands that this illumination will be followed by the exercise of intercession by each prophet for his flock, so that even where negative divine judgement cannot be averted on grounds of invincible ignorance, it may be mitigated or graciously laid aside following the eschatological pleading of each community's advocate. Hence Moses shall intercede for erring Jews, and Jesus will plead the case of Christians. Moreover several hadith lead the tradition to believe that the Greatest Intercession, which is to be exercised by the Prophet Muḥammad alone, as Prophet of Mercy and restorer of the Great Covenant, will extend beyond the boundaries of Muslim affiliation to allow a pleading for adherents of previous versions of faith (Zabīdī, 1311AH, 10, 494-95). This is not understood as a kind of postmortem evangelisation; it is simply a manifestation of God's mercy through the channel of the Prophet.

Concluding Remarks

What kind of soteriology do these discussions produce? It is clear that the theological understanding sketched in the foregoing paragraphs cannot be la-

belled 'inclusivist' in the sense intended by most contemporary Christian theologians. Given Islam's assurance of multiple and equivalently saving interventions in history, there is no need to engage in the patronising exercise of regarding non-Muslims as 'anonymous Muslims', if we take the term 'Muslim' in the denominational sense. Although the Prophet may ultimately bring about their salvation, their submission to God, to the extent that they practice it, is derived not ontologically, that is, 'anonymously' from the person of Muḥammad, but epistemologically, from natural theology and from remnant teachings handed down from the founders of their own religions, whose detailed instructions are abrogated or have been mislaid, but whose general teachings of the unity and justice of God may be remembered sufficiently to trigger or to reinforce the inference of God's existence and qualities from the natural order. They are not Muslims, but they are, as the theologians put it, adjudged to be in the same category. The *kalām* has hence never needed to develop intricate theories of prevenient grace or postmortem conversion. The doctrine of intercession, Māturīdite optimism about the powers of natural reason, and the insistence on a cyclic process of propositional revelation whose details are modulated in each prophetic episode, instead of a single personal revelation which tends to divide history and also geography into categorically different parts, render the question of the *falāḥ* of the Other a comparatively simple one.

Even though it conserves the Muslim scriptural assurance of the *naskh* of earlier messages, this model of non-categoric supersession may serve to obviate one of the hazards of supersessionist theologies which pluralists most frequently cite, namely the sin of arrogance. The Ghazālīan perspective shifts much of the burden of accountability from the shoulders of the unreached, here generously defined, to set it upon the shoulders of Muslim believers, creating the humbling possibility that a *bien-pensant* Muslim may be passed over for *falāḥ* in favour of a non-Muslim neighbour. Supersessionism thus has negative implications for dialogue only when read as cause for triumphalism, rather than as a spur to the contrite awareness of a heavy responsibility. Triumphalism, moreover, seems scarcely feasible as a contemporary attitude given the collapse of Islam's erstwhile position of global domination. Even the Dome of the Rock has become an ambiguous sign.

Hick, Knitter and their Muslim travelling-companions are, we may conclude, mistaken in suggesting that foundational claims for the present centrality of one's own community in salvation history ineluctably lead believers towards *hubris*, discord and confrontation. While this appears to have been the case with the very absolute claims for uniqueness made by many forms of western Christianity, it is less unambiguously valid in the case of other faith communities such as Islam, where a scriptural doctrine of non-categoric supersession

has in practice often underpinned a level of religious coexistence which has been sustained for many centuries, and can today easily support a theology of an authentic esteem for the Other. The demands of living in an intertwined world are urgent, but need not force the religions to renounce core aspects of their self-understanding, as long as that self-understanding does not entail the demonisation of the Other and the adoption of a Manichean view of history and the world.

The surest sign of a supersessionism that is humble, and seeks the esteem rather than the alienation of earlier communities, is a commitment to the struggle against oppression and injustice. Specifically, a non-categoric supersessionism should provide the theological foundation for the widespread contemporary reassessment of the medieval *Sharī'a* regulations which have defined the social place of non-Muslim scriptuaries. Thinkers such as Abdul-Hamid AbuSulayman and several others have already urged the abolition or radical recasting of the bulk of the *dhimma* laws as medieval constructs whose relationship to the divine predicate of justice appears extremely problematic (AbuSulayman, 1987). The support of some conservative Arab rulers for the construction of churches is a sign that this approach is capable of being made a reality and that arrogance and insecurity, leading to the oppression of the People of the Book, are not the only tendencies visible in the present-day lands of Islam.²⁸ Respect and conviviality, for which there is sure Koranic warrant, do not, however, require the dismantling of a frankly supersessionist theology which is constitutive of Islam itself, and which is an indispensable justification for its existence. For it is religious truth claims which should generate tolerance—not vice versa.

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²⁸ See, for instance, *The Tablet* (21 February 1998) for the new cathedrals in Bahrain, Oman, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, built on land donated by the local rulers.

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